

Letter to Congressional Leaders on NAFTA

November 15, 1993

Dear Mr. Speaker: (Dear Mr. Leader:)

As we approach the end of an intense debate over the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), I want to share with you my reasons for believing Congressional approval of NAFTA is essential to our national interest.

We share a commitment to ensuring that our country has the world's strongest and most competitive economy, to maintaining and creating jobs for our workers, and to making sure that opportunities are there for our children as they join the workforce of the future. That is why I am fighting for the approval of NAFTA. I am convinced that it will help strengthen our economy—in the near term and in the long run.

Our nation's prosperity depends on our ability to compete and win in the global economy. It is an illusion to believe that we can prosper by retreating behind protectionist walls. We will succeed only by ensuring that we have the world's most competitive companies, productive workers, and open markets in which to sell our manufactured goods, services, and agricultural products.

I understand that NAFTA is, for many, a reminder of the economic hardships and insecurities that have grown over the past 20 years. Obviously, NAFTA did not cause those problems. In fact, it is part of the solution. We are world-class producers of everything from computers and automobiles to financial services and soybeans. We can compete anywhere, but we need to ensure that markets around the world are open to our products.

Mexico represents an enormous opportunity for our businesses, our workers, and our farmers. Exports there have already soared since 1986, when Mexico began to open its market and lower trade barriers. But the status quo in the trading relationship—in which Mexico's trade barriers are far higher than ours—is still unacceptable. NAFTA represents both free and fair trade. It changes the status quo by wiping away the Mexican barriers.

NAFTA provides us preferential access to the Mexican market: 90 million people, in

one of the most dynamic growing economies in the world, who look to us for consumer goods, agricultural products and the infrastructure needed to build a modern economy. It is the gateway to the fast growing markets of Latin America, which are also opening, where we have a natural advantage over Japan and the European Community. Turning away from this opportunity would be a serious self-inflicted wound to our economy. It would cost us jobs—in the short and long term.

Many opponents of NAFTA say that they don't oppose a trade agreement with Mexico. They say they just oppose this NAFTA, and suggest that it be renegotiated. We should be under no illusions. This is a far-reaching and fair agreement. It was negotiated painstakingly over three years with input from a broad array of groups, and it is in the best interest of the United States, Mexico and Canada. It represents an unprecedented effort to include in a trade agreement provisions to enhance environmental protection and workers rights. It was negotiated by a Republican President, and endorsed and strengthened by a Democratic President. If it were defeated, no government of Mexico could return, or would return, to the negotiating table for years to come. Mexico would turn to others, like Japan and the European Community, for help in building a modern state—and American workers, farmers, and businesses would be the losers.

Of course, NAFTA is not a magic bullet for all our economic problems. But there is no question that NAFTA will benefit every region of our country. It is no accident that NAFTA has the support of more than two-thirds of the nation's governors and Members of Congress from every part of the nation. They understand the benefits that will flow to their states, regardless of region.

My main reason for supporting NAFTA is that it will be good for the competitive U.S. economy that we are trying to build. But there is another critical issue that I ask you to consider. After World War I, the United States chose the path of isolation and protectionism. That path led directly to the Depression, and helped set the world on the path to World War II. After World War II, we chose to engage with the world, through col-

lective security and expanded trade. We helped our allies rebuild, ushered in a period of unprecedented global economic growth, and prevailed over communism.

Now we face another defining moment. The rejection of NAFTA would set back our relationship with Mexico, and Latin American beyond, for years to come. It would send a signal that the world's leading power has chosen the path of pessimism and protectionism. It would gravely undermine our ability to convince other countries to join us in completing the Uruguay Round, which is essential to expand trade and enhance global growth.

Rejecting NAFTA would, quite simply, put us on the wrong side of history. That is not our destiny. I ask the House of Representatives to join me in choosing the path of expanded trade, to make the decision to compete in the world, rather than to retreat behind our borders. We are a great country, and we cannot shrink from this test.

Sincerely,

Bill Clinton

NOTE: Identical letters were sent to Thomas S. Foley, Speaker of the House of Representatives, and Robert H. Michel, House Republican leader. This letter was made available by the Office of the Press Secretary on November 16 but was not issued as a White House press release.

Remarks on Signing the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993

November 16, 1993

Thank you very much, Mr. Vice President, for those fine remarks and to the Members of Congress, the chaplains of the House and the Senate, and to all of you who worked so hard to help this day become a reality. Let me especially thank the Coalition for the Free Exercise of Religion for the central role they played in drafting this legislation and working so hard for its passage.

It is interesting to note, as the Vice President said, what a broad coalition of Americans came together to make this bill a reality; interesting to note that that coalition produced a 97-to-3 vote in the United States Senate and a bill that had such broad support it was adopted on a voice vote in the House.

I'm told that, as many of the people in the coalition worked together across ideological and religious lines, some new friendships were formed and some new trust was established, which shows, I suppose, that the power of God is such that even in the legislative process miracles can happen. *[Laughter]*

We all have a shared desire here to protect perhaps the most precious of all American liberties, religious freedom. Usually the signing of legislation by a President is a ministerial act, often a quiet ending to a turbulent legislative process. Today this event assumes a more majestic quality because of our ability together to affirm the historic role that people of faith have played in the history of this country and the constitutional protections those who profess and express their faith have always demanded and cherished.

The power to reverse legislation by legislation, a decision of the United States Supreme Court, is a power that is rightly hesitantly and infrequently exercised by the United States Congress. But this is an issue in which that extraordinary measure was clearly called for. As the Vice President said, this act reverses the Supreme Court's decision Employment Division against Smith and reestablishes a standard that better protects all Americans of all faiths in the exercise of their religion in a way that I am convinced is far more consistent with the intent of the Founders of this Nation than the Supreme Court decision.

More than 50 cases have been decided against individuals making religious claims against Government action since that decision was handed down. This act will help to reverse that trend by honoring the principle that our laws and institutions should not impede or hinder but rather should protect and preserve fundamental religious liberties.

The free exercise of religion has been called the first freedom, that which originally sparked the development of the full range of the Bill of Rights. Our Founders cared a lot about religion. And one of the reasons they worked so hard to get the first amendment into the Bill of Rights at the head of the class is that they well understood what could happen to this country, how both reli-